

6. After Paul and Barnabas had finished recounting their experiences among the Gentiles, James stood up and addressed the council. (This “James” was the half-brother of Jesus, the traditional author of the epistle of James and the primary overseer of the Jerusalem Church – ref. Matthew 13:55; cf. Acts 12:17, 21:17-18; 1 Corinthians 15:3-7 and Galatians 1:18-19). Like them, James also reinforced Peter’s insistence that God’s purpose and power were behind the salvation of the Gentiles. Paul and Barnabas did so by noting God’s attesting signs and wonders as they preached the gospel to the Gentiles; James moved beyond experiential evidence to the testimony of the Scriptures themselves. God was demonstrating through His supernatural and saving activity that the ingathering of the Gentiles was His work; James sought to show that this activity was precisely what He had promised through the mouths of His prophets (15:13-15).

The theme of Gentile salvation in the messianic age fills the prophetic writings, so that James could have used any number of scriptural passages to prove that particular point. But, as noted above, this wasn’t the council’s concern; every man present recognized God’s intention to save the Gentiles. Again, the matter at hand pertained to the terms of their inclusion in the covenant household, and this is precisely why James chose to cite from the prophet Amos (15:16-18). The question concerned the obligation of Gentiles to come into God’s household through the covenant instruments of circumcision and the Law of Moses, and Amos’ treatment of the messianic age speaks to this issue – *not directly, but when considered and interpreted within the larger prophetic revelation.*

This dynamic helps to explain why many Christians (and commentators) fail to discern the actual connection between Amos’ prophecy and the issue before the council.

- Those who believe that the council was only considering the issue of Gentile inclusion in the Church (ref. 15:14) find in the Amos passage what is evident in a multitude of prophetic contexts, namely the fact that God had repeatedly revealed His intention to make His Servant-Messiah the point of ingathering for the nations as well as a remnant of Israel and Judah.
- Christians of a dispensational persuasion have a particularly difficult time discerning James’ point. Because they start from the premise that the “raising up of David’s fallen tabernacle” pertains to a future millennial kingdom, having Amos’ prophecy apply to the present circumstance of Gentile salvation – as James was doing – requires them to find in it two distinct referents set in different ages or “dispensations”: The one pertains to the present “Church age” and God’s work of gathering in the Gentiles; the second to the establishment of the Davidic throne and kingdom at the end of the age when Jesus returns.

“In the discussion of the relationship of the church to the Gentiles in the counsel at Jerusalem in Acts 15, it is brought out that the earlier prophecies of Amos 9:11-15 predicted the order of Gentile blessing first, to be followed by reestablishment of the tabernacle of David. This was to coincide with Israel’s regathering and reestablishment in the land, never to be scattered again. (Chafer and Walvoord, Major Bible Themes)

Thus the dispensational presupposition concerning the restoration of David's kingdom forces dispensationalists to conclude that James saw a component, partial fulfillment of Amos's prophecy in the ingathering of the Gentiles, but not a complete and final one.

- While James was drawing upon Amos to support the fact that Yahweh is now bringing in Gentiles "called by His name," he wasn't in any way suggesting that that present activity is fulfilling Amos' promise to Israel.
- God will "raise up David's fallen tabernacle" when Jesus returns at the end of the age, fulfilling at last His covenant promise to David and ushering in the glorious millennial kingdom.

One obvious problem with this scenario is the chronology between verses 11 and 12 of Amos' prophecy. When one starts with the premise that verse 11 pertains to Christ's Parousia, the fact that James applies verse 12 to the present time of Gentile ingathering forces one of two interpretive decisions. That decision involves the interpretation of the Hebrew conjunction linking the two verses.

Most English versions translate this Hebrew term with the conjunction *that*, short for the causal (purpose) phrase "*in order that*." This is the proper sense of the Hebrew, but it effectively reverses the chronology demanded by the dispensational premise regarding verse 11. That is, it indicates that the purpose for raising up David's fallen tabernacle is that Israel should take possession of the remnant of Edom and all the nations called by God's name. Thus the restoration of David's house (v. 11) must *precede* what is specified of the Gentiles (v. 12).

- 1) The first way dispensationalists answer this problem is to make verse 12 refer to Israel's purported supremacy over the nations of the earth during the millennial kingdom. Israel's "possession" of the Gentiles thus speaks to its dominance over them. This interpretation preserves the chronology imposed by the Hebrew conjunction, *but doesn't allow for James' use of this passage*. The way to resolve this problem is to find a secondary, indirect reference in Amos' prophecy to God's present activity among the Gentiles. And so, while the prophecy's contextual meaning pertains to the period of the millennial kingdom, James was extending it in a certain sense to the Gentile phenomenon occurring during the present Church age.
- 2) The second option is to alter the translation of the Hebrew conjunction in order to preserve the necessary chronology. The adverb "after" is often used to accomplish this, so that Amos' meaning is that God will restore David's desolate house *subsequent* to gathering in the Gentiles. Among other obvious problems with this approach, the most significant to the matter at hand is that it destroys the ability of this passage to make James' point. It allows it to apply to the present Gentile salvation, but it no longer answers the question of the terms of their inclusion in God's household.

And so, apart from the larger questions of dispensational hermeneutics, it remains that this interpretation of James' use of Amos only works if James was seeking to biblically support the *fact* of Gentile ingathering. But that wasn't the issue of concern: *The point of his citation was to answer the question of whether or not the believing Gentiles needed to be circumcised and bound to the Law of Moses.* The context makes this clear (ref. again 15:1-2, 5-6), but so does the inference James drew from his citation of Amos (15:19-20). A dispensational hermeneutic allows for the Amos context to address the question of Gentiles being saved, but it makes it impossible to discern how it answers the actual question at hand. This will hopefully become evident in the treatment to follow.

- a. The first thing to note about the Amos citation is its focal point in the *Davidic Covenant*. In that covenant, God had promised to establish David's house, throne and kingdom forever. But, in his overall prophecy, Amos – consistent with all the writing prophets – was proclaiming the impending desolation of both Israel and Judah (2:4-3:2) (although the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel was his primary emphasis). David's "tabernacle" was soon to be thrown down, even to the extent that David's royal line would be cut off during the reign of Jehoiachin (Jeremiah 22:24-30). The prophets were united in declaring the end of the Davidic theocracy, but also in upholding God's faithfulness regarding His covenant with David. The desolation of David's kingship and kingdom was not to be ultimate; Amos, like the other prophets, affirmed a future day when Yahweh would raise up David's fallen tabernacle and fulfill His word to him.

Dispensationalists have always maintained that the Davidic Covenant will be fulfilled at Christ's return when He allegedly establishes His millennial reign, but Peter's Pentecost sermon (as well as the uniform witness of the New Testament, especially as it interacts with and interprets the Old Testament) indicates this fulfillment as occurring with Jesus' ascension and enthronement at His Father's right hand (ref. again Acts 2:22-36).

- b. The Davidic Covenant, in turn, establishes the *typological connection between David and his covenant Son*: David's kingship and kingdom were to find their everlasting ultimacy in the Son promised to him. This explains why the prophets who prophesied after the making of the covenant spoke of the future covenant Son under the name of "David": Just as David's kingdom would find its ultimate realization in Him, so would David himself (cf. Ezekiel 34:23-24, 37:15-25; Hosea 3:1-5). David typified this Son, but so did the features of his kingdom and dominion: *This connection is critical to understanding James' use of Amos.* The following is a summary of those key features:

- 1) In heart, if not in rule, the house of Israel had been divided since the time of the judges. After Saul's death the tribe of Judah formally brought itself under David's kingship while the other eleven tribes continued under Saul's son Ish-bosheth (2 Samuel 2:1-10). Later David united all twelve tribes of Israel under his reign, gathering them to himself, not through domination, but by earning their love and devotion (2 Samuel 5:1-3).

- 2) In addition to unifying the tribes of Israel, David extended his dominion to the geographical boundaries established by the Abrahamic Covenant (cf. Genesis 15:1-18, Exodus 23:31 and Deuteronomy 11:22-25 with 2 Samuel 8:1-3, 10:15-16 and 1 Kings 4:21). Most importantly, this geographical enlargement of the kingdom came through David's military conquests and expressed itself in numerous virtual vassal states under Israelite dominion.
- David's authority and rule – the *kingdom* of Israel – extended to the Abrahamic boundaries and encompassed the peoples of those lands such that they served the king of Israel as vassals and brought their tribute to him (2 Samuel 8:1-12; also 1 Kings 4:21).
 - At the same time, those lands beyond Palestine weren't annexed to become part of Israel proper and their Gentile inhabitants weren't absorbed into the Israelite nation. The nations residing within the Abrahamic inheritance were subject to Israel's king and gave him their material devotion, but as bona fide Gentiles, not proselytes.

David's kingdom was a composite kingdom consisting of Jews and Gentiles united solely by their mutual submission to Israel's king. This defining feature is crucial to its typological significance as established in the Davidic Covenant.

- c. David ruled over a composite kingdom – the very kingdom which God had sworn to establish forever. The implication is that Messiah's kingdom would likewise be composite, and this dynamic is central to Amos' prophecy of the restoration of David's house. The fact that James drew upon this prophecy shows that he understood this; *more than that, he recognized the importance of that truth for resolving the question at hand.*

Consistent with his fellow prophets, Amos emphasized the sure and blessed hope of a future day when Yahweh would fulfill His promise to David in the Davidic Covenant. The early Church (as all the New Testament writers) recognized that fulfillment as having come in the ascension and enthronement of Jesus of Nazareth. David's royal dominion has been restored in Him – God has “raised up David's fallen tabernacle” – and the enthroned King has sent His Spirit in order to add “living stones” to David's house – in the language of Jeremiah, to provide regal sons for David (Jeremiah 33:14-22).

James recognized the fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant in Jesus the Messiah, but he also understood its implication for the Church: The question before the council was the terms under which the Gentiles become members of God's covenant household. Expressed in the language of Amos' prophecy, *how do the Gentiles enter into David's kingdom and come under the dominion of his royal heir?* Amos prophesied that the restoration of David's house would be unto Israel's “possession” of the nations; now that that restoration had occurred, what does it mean for Gentile subjects of David's covenant Son?

- d. Following the New Testament pattern, James drew his citation from the Septuagint. In it, the Hebrew phrase “*that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations...*” is rendered “*that the remnant of men and all the nations may seek...*” (The Septuagint supplies no object of this seeking, but James rightly understood that God is the implied object.) The Hebrew of Amos 9:12 expresses God’s promise that the restored Davidic house will gain the nations as their inheritance; the Septuagint conveys the same essential truth, though it approaches it from the vantage point of the nations (*they will seek the Lord*) rather than from Israel’s perspective (*they will take possession of the nations*).

The Septuagint – which James believed accurately reflects the text’s meaning – shows that Israel’s “possession” of the nations refers to its obtaining them as an inheritance, not its domination of them as maintained by many dispensationalists. Amos’ prophecy doesn’t indicate Israel’s world supremacy in the supposed Millennium, but the ingathering of the nations into Christ’s kingdom.

What neither the Hebrew or Septuagint text indicates is the *nature* of the compositism of David’s restored house. That restoration would find Israel gaining the nations as an inheritance, but in what sense? Do those Gentiles become sons of the kingdom by becoming Israelites as many at the council were insisting and as required in the Old Covenant economy? The answer, again, is found in the dynamics of David’s kingdom.

- Membership in God’s *covenant household* demanded submission to the covenant obligations of circumcision and the Law of Moses.
- The *kingdom of Israel*, however, was composite and cosmopolitan; its larger body of subjects was defined only by allegiance and submission to its king. The nations who came under David’s rule (even as administered afterward in his sons) were neither circumcised nor compelled to comply with the Law of Moses.

Now, in Christ, both of these theocratic dynamics are merged; covenant relationship with Yahweh is conjoined with submission to the lordship of His King. *What was impossible in the Israelite kingdom is now achieved in Christ’s fulfillment:*

- As David’s kingdom embraced Gentiles as such, so does Christ’s. David’s power in conquest gained him the possession of many tribes, tongues, nations, and peoples. They served him and gave him their material tribute, but as non-Israelites. So the typological significance of David’s kingdom – defined in terms of its *perpetuity* by the Davidic Covenant – indicated that his covenant Son would rule over his kingdom having the same cosmopolitan structure and composition.
- But in contrast to David’s kingdom, the Gentiles serving David’s Son have the full rights of covenant sonship, for they have embraced the covenant signs: They have received true circumcision through union with Abraham’s Seed and are covenantally bound to Yahweh by His everlasting covenant – the covenant in His Son that the Law of Moses served as a pedagogue, prophet and herald.